GRASSROOTS JOURNALS

Grassroots Journal of Natural Resources, Vol.8 No.2 (August 2025)
ISSN: 2581-6853 | CODEN: GJNRA9 | Published by The Grassroots Institute
Website: https://grassrootsjournals.org/gjnr | Main Indexing: Scopus and WoS

ISSN 2581-6853 | 8(2) August 2025

00584 | Research Article

The Historical Roots of Assam-Nagaland Border Disputes and Their Impact on Forest Resources

Bhrigumoni Nath[1], Vulli Dhanaraju*[2]
[1]Department of History, Assam University, Diphu Campus, Assam, India.
Email: bhrigunath.nath418@gmail.com | ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0000-7835-0885
[2]Department of History, North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU), Shillong, Meghalaya, India.
Email: vullidhanaraju@gmail.com | ORCID: http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5559-1077
**Corresponding author*

How to cite this paper: Nath, B. and Dhanaraju, V. (2025). The Historical Roots of Assam-Nagaland Border Disputes and Their Impact on Forest Resources. *Grassroots Journal of Natural Resources*, 8(2): 754-774. Doi: https://doi.org/10.33002/nr2581.6853.080235

Received: 25 June 2025
Reviewed: 16 August 2025
Provisionally Accepted: 17 August 2025
Revised: 18 August 2025
Finally Accepted: 20 August 2025
Published: 30 August 2025
Copyright © 2025 by author(s)

Publisher's Note: We stay neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps, permissions taken by authors and institutional affiliations.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).
http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

Open Access

Executive Chief Editor
Dr. Hasrat Arjjumend
Associate Editor
Dr. Usongo Patience
Assistant Managing Editor
Mr. Kartik Omanakuttan

Abstract

The Assam-Nagaland border dispute, rooted in colonial policies and ambiguous land demarcations, has led to persistent conflicts and significant environmental degradation, particularly affecting forest resources critical to tribal livelihoods. This study investigates the historical origins of this dispute and its socio-economic and ecological impacts, emphasizing the need for clear land titling and community-driven conservation to ensure sustainable resource management and regional stability. By analyzing colonial interventions and their lasting effects, the research highlights how unresolved territorial claims continue to undermine effective governance and threaten biodiversity in the border region. Employing qualitative methods, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 16 purposively selected stakeholders from five border villages, representing diverse tribal communities, supplemented by archival records, government reports, and media sources from 2021–2025. Findings reveal that colonial policies, notably the Treaty of Yandaboo (1826) and the Indian Forest Act (1878), disrupted communal land systems, creating ambiguous boundaries that intensified after Nagaland's formation in 1963. Stakeholders reported that unclear land ownership fuels violent clashes, such as the 1985 Merapani incident (over 100 deaths), with Nagaland's alleged encroachment of 66,241 hectares, including 17,500 hectares forest land, driving deforestation. Field observations and interviews confirmed a 55.71% loss of common property resources (1,401,184.8 acres) from 1947–2000, leading to biodiversity decline. The nexus between border disputes and forest management is evident in competing agrarian claims, with Assam's settlement policies and Nagaland's infrastructure expansion exacerbating resource depletion. The study implies that unresolved territorial disputes undermine sustainable forest governance, threatening tribal livelihoods. It concludes that addressing colonial legacies through clear land titling and participatory boundary demarcation is essential.

Keywords

Border dispute; Colonialism; Forest resources; Assam-Nagaland; Land alienation

Introduction

Border landscape, as seen by the social scientist, is a set of cultural, economic, and political interactions and processes occurring in space (Rumley and Minghi, 1991). Endowed with plenty of natural resources, including dense and impenetrable forests and a hostile topography with a congenial climatic condition, the Assam-Nagaland Border region has been experiencing all the adversities resulting from ruthless removal and extirpation of all nature's gifts by profit-making agencies. The capitalist intervention started with the annexation of the Ahom kingdom by the British colonialists vide the Yandaboo Pact, 1826, signed between the East India Company and the Burmese rulers (Barpujari, 1992). Before the advent of the British, forestry practices were extremely limited, and reference could be made in this regard about the three officials, namely *Habiyal Baruah, Kathkotiya Baruah, and Hati Baruah* (Barbarua), appointed by the Ahom kings in the later part of their reign. They were entrusted to take care of the forest products, forest timbers, and the abundant elephant population, which eventually occupied an important place in the market of that time (Gogoi, 1983). A substantial portion of the Assam-Nagaland Border region was under the dominance of the Ahom kingdom; besides, parts towards the south were ruled by the Kacharis in the earlier periods. The socio-economic and political dominance of the Ahoms naturally had some impact on resource utilization. Being the centre for most of the economic and political caricature of the rulers, few urban centres with a potential population size were developed in this region. The prominence of war politics to dominate neighbouring kingdoms gave birth to several Army Camps, around which settlements had grown to supply the needs of the army, and turned into an urban agglomeration. Desoi, Morongi, Kaliabor, Gargaon, Dimapur, etc., are such urban agglomerations. No doubt, in the absence of sufficient open space, these were erected at the cost of considerable deforestation. Agriculture was subsistence in nature, which in no measure could be accorded as an active factor of deforestation supported by a low population growth (Goswami, 2017).

The Northeast of India, consisting of seven states, has increasingly become a hotspot of conflict, threatening interstate unity. As political and social turmoil intensifies, the region is grappling with multiple interstate disputes. Long-standing border conflicts in Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Manipur, and Nagaland highlight the ongoing tensions (Boro and Kakoti, 2024; Das and Sarma, 2014; Dowerah, 2014; Franke, 2009; Gogoi, 2019; Kindo and Minj, 2008; Mahanta, 2024; Misra, 2014; Sundaram, 1976). A particularly notable example is the boundary dispute between Assam and Nagaland, which has strained relations between the two states (Konyak, 2016; Misra, 2014). This issue traces back to the historical roots of their creation, with the two states at odds over their shared border since Nagaland was carved out of Assam (Sundaram, 1976). The majority of Assam's border with other states is made up of foothills. The people living in the foothills have enjoyed the essential status of an intermediary group in the political and socio-economic connections between the residents of the hills and the plains. Traditionally, hill tribes traded raw cotton, rock salt, iron, spices, oranges, and so on for rice, dried fish, and silk from the lowlands. The foothills also served as crucial gateways for communities involved in trade and commerce outside of their own environments. However, the colonial authority hindered this system of interaction by using the foothills as rigid limits and a tool for managing the hills. With the advent of the British territory, mapping began (Gait, 2013). Provinces and districts were established to meet the empire's

economic and political needs. Such a measure resulted in significant disparities between the current social landscape and the emergent political-administrative system (Gait, 2013).

This study seeks to investigate the historical roots of the Assam-Nagaland boundary conflict and its implications for forest land. The border region has experienced notable encroachment by populations from both states, resulting in ongoing tensions and conflict. Keeping in view the aim of the study, the following objectives have been outlined:

1) To study the colonial and post-colonial government interventions
2) To analyse the nature of the conflict surrounding the Assam-Nagaland border areas and its implications on the forest areas.

Methodology

Study Area

This study focuses on the Assam-Nagaland border region, spanning a 434-km boundary, with specific emphasis on disputed areas in Assam's Golaghat, Jorhat, Sivasagar, and Karbi Anglong districts. These districts are central to territorial claims, with Assam alleging that Nagaland has encroached upon over 66,000 hectares, including over 80% of reserved forests such as Diphu, Nambor, and Rengma. The study targets five villages namely Merapani, Borhollah, Tsurmen Basti, Gomariguri, and Jamuguri, strategically selected for their proximity to the border and their diverse demographic composition, encompassing communities such as the Ahom, Karbi, Bodo, Lotha, and Ao tribes. These villages are located administratively as follows: Merapani (Golaghat district, Assam, and Wokha district, Nagaland), Borhollah (Golaghat district, Assam), Tsurmen Basti (Tiru Hills, Nagaland), Gomariguri (Dayang reserve forest, Assam), and Jamuguri (Dayang reserve forest, Assam). Their locations are shown on the map in figure 1.

Data Collection

The study was conducted from July to December 2024, utilizing a mixed-method approach combining primary and secondary data sources to ensure a comprehensive analysis of the Assam-Nagaland border dispute and its impact on forest resources. Primary data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with 16 stakeholders from the five selected villages (Tarani T.S., Gelajan, Tarani Borkathoni, Yampha Naga Basti, and Uriamghat), chosen for their heterogeneity to represent diverse communities affected by the border conflict. The selection criteria prioritized individuals with direct involvement or impact from the dispute, including:

- Forest Inhabitants: Six respondents (two from Uriamghat, one each from Tarani T.S., Gelajan, Tarani Borkathoni, and Yampha Naga Basti) who rely on forest resources for their livelihood, such as small-scale farming and collection of forest produce (e.g., timber, resin).
- Civil Society Groups: Five representatives from local organizations in Golaghat and Wokha districts, actively engaged in advocacy for land rights and conflict resolution, including members of the Assam-Nagaland Border Peace Committee.

- Local Headmen: Five village leaders (one per village) responsible for mediating community disputes and interacting with state authorities on land and resource issues.

Interviews were conducted using a standardized questionnaire (Annexure-1) designed to capture subjective perspectives on the conflict's historical roots, current dynamics, and environmental impacts. The questionnaire included open-ended questions. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was conducted in local languages (Assamese, Nagamese, or Hindi) with the assistance of trained interpreters to ensure accuracy. Interviews were recorded with consent, transcribed, and anonymized to protect respondents' identities due to the sensitive nature of the conflict. Field visits to the villages were undertaken to observe land use patterns and evidence of deforestation, with GPS coordinates recorded to map encroachment areas.

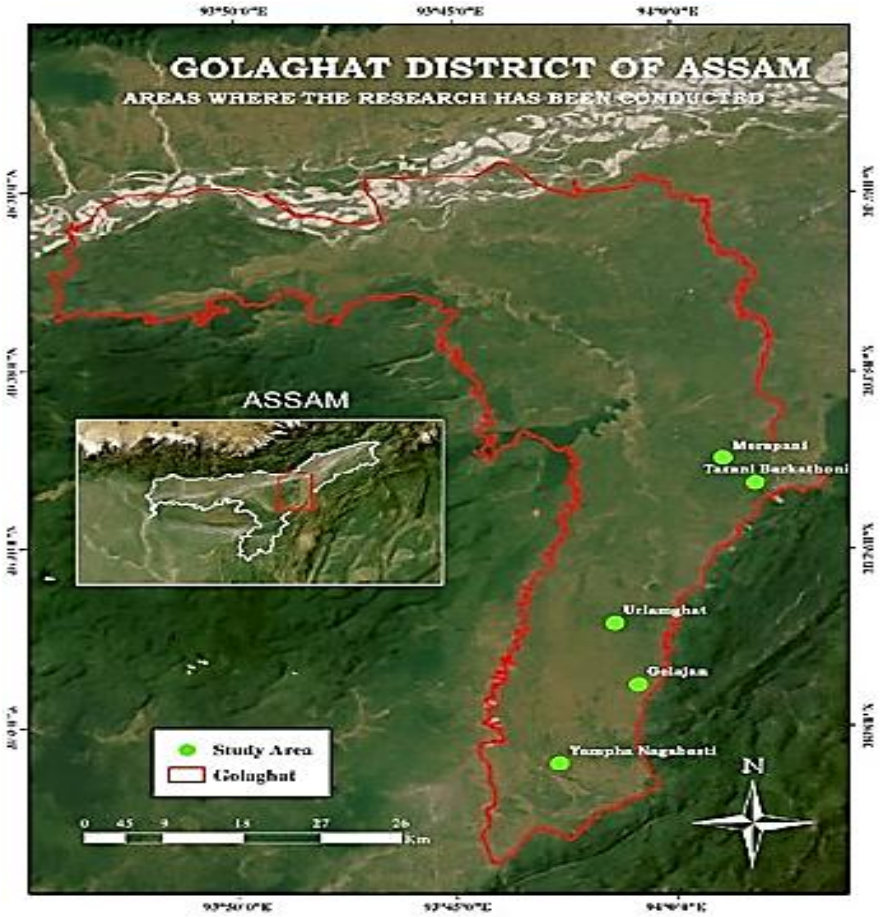

Figure 1: Map of the study area

Secondary data were sourced from archival records, government reports, and scholarly literature. Archival sources included colonial official letters, ethnographical accounts, diaries, imperial gazetteers, boundary survey reports, and historical maps from the Assam State Archives and the National Archives of India. Government reports, such as the Assam Legislative Assembly Debate (1937) and notifications from the Forest

Department (e.g., No. TAD/FR/5/50/67, 1952), provided data on land allocation and forest policies. Additional secondary sources included peer-reviewed articles, books, and media reports (accessed via government websites and academic databases. These sources contextualized the historical and policy dimensions of the dispute.

Data Processing and Analysis

The study employed qualitative research techniques, including historical, critical, analytical, and interpretive methods, to analyze the collected data. Primary data from interviews were transcribed, coded, and categorized using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes, such as colonial legacy, land ownership ambiguity, and environmental degradation. NVivo software was used to manage and analyze qualitative data, ensuring systematic coding and cross-referencing of responses. Secondary data were subjected to critical analysis to evaluate historical policies and their long-term impacts. The historical method was particularly emphasized to trace the evolution of the conflict from colonial interventions (e.g., Treaty of Yandaboo, 1826) to post-independence state formation (e.g., Nagaland's creation in 1963). Analytical techniques assessed the socio-economic and environmental repercussions, focusing on deforestation and biodiversity loss in reserved forests. Interpretive methods were applied to understand stakeholders' subjective experiences and their implications for policy formulation.

Limitations

The study faced challenges in accessing certain sensitive data due to the ongoing conflict and security concerns, limiting the scope of some primary data collection. Additionally, the reliance on secondary sources for historical context may introduce biases inherent in colonial or government records. Despite these constraints, the triangulation of primary and secondary data ensured a robust analysis of the Assam-Nagaland border dispute and its environmental impacts.

Results and Discussion

Colonial Intervention

Capitalism under British colonialism penetrated into all the resources of the colonized territories to generate more profit and to establish their suzerainty. The Moamoria revolt of 1786 and the brutal Burmese invasion in 1824 ensured a mandatory intervention of the British, i.e., East India Company, which most possibly provided a preconceived idea to the colonial representatives about the rich natural resources of Assam in particular and of the whole Northeast in general. The Burmese invasion of Assam in 1817 set off a terrible period of occupation. Ahom nobility sought assistance from the British East India Company, which saw an opportunity to expand its influence in the region. The resultant Anglo-Burmese War (1824–1826) finally brought the Burmese army to defeat, and the Treaty of Yandaboo was signed in 1826. The Yandaboo Treaty, therefore, is more often regarded as the gate pass to establish imperialist hegemony in Assam. The year 1838 witnessed the total occupation by the British imperialists, capturing all political, economic, and social aspects of the state (Makenzie, 1979). Till then Assam-Nagaland Border in large was largely under the Ahom regime and had experienced very

little forestry practices in the form of collection of *lac* (created by insect *Kerria lacca* on mulberry trees), timber, elephant tusks, rhinoceros's horns, buffalo's hide, resin, etc. to meet their minimum requirement. A substantial amount of forest produce was exported to neighbouring kingdoms, and the rest was released to trade in the localities, particularly in the *Duars* (literal meaning 'gates'), the entrance into the Ahom kingdom. Several Duars in the region served as central hubs for the exchange of goods with the hill inhabitants according to their requirements and wants. Disturbances and prevailing unrest all throughout the region provided a sound backup to the imperial power to establish imperial suzerainty and to upset the entire existing traditional system of social, cultural, and economic fabric of North East India. The diplomacy of colonialist thus worked positively in their favour, and in due course, it gave them a free hand to expand all policies of exploitation over all the resources, both living and non-living, of the region.

Stakeholder interviews and secondary sources reveal that British colonial policies, particularly the Treaty of Yandaboo (1826), disrupted traditional communal land and resource management systems along the Assam-Nagaland border. A headman from Merapani and a forest inhabitant from Borhollah highlighted pre-colonial peaceful resource sharing, which colonial surveys and resource extraction policies undermined. Stakeholders from Gomariguri and Tsurmen Basti emphasized that British-imposed boundaries ignored tribal interactions, laying the foundation for modern territorial disputes by prioritizing economic exploitation over community practices.

Forest Polices and Their Impact on Forest Resources

The history of forest policy of British India is inseparable from the history of forest policy of Northeast India in general and of Assam in particular (Goswami, 2017). Except few scattered areas, including Assam, most of the provinces of India have already come under the jurisdiction of the Forest Department. The Forest Department for Assam was first opened in 1868 (Ribbentrop, 1989). The forests of the 'colonial Assam' were thoroughly surveyed by the British before their occupation. This indicates their eagerness to intervene in the ecological and political system of the state. The second important aspect portrayed in the framework of colonial forestry is that the forest rights of local people, which they had been enjoying for generations, were brought under their control, and all regulations were imposed to procure more profit (Stracey, 1953). It is, however, noticed that as per the Indian Forest Act 1878 and the Assam Forest Regulation, 1891, several village forests were constituted in Assam under the direct supervision of the State Forest Department. The Regulation further provided the local government necessary power to make rules for regulating forest management of the village forests, and the major burden of management was imposed on the village community (Handique, 2004).

The formation of the forest village not only helped in protecting the forests from fire and the trespassers and illegal practices of individuals, but also rendered an indirect service to generate more revenue from the forest. It also helped in procuring labour for the work to be done in the forest. The government took initiative to increase the number of village forests as it became more productive from the view point of forest as it became more productive from viewpoint of forest management. In 1920, the Government initiated the declaration of specific areas in Sibsagar as village forests.

The reserved forests of Dirai, Abhayapur, Galeki, Tiru Hills, Desai, Desai Valley, Dayang, Rengma, and Diphu, located along the Assam-Nagaland border, have been designated for the establishment of village forests. Despite the delegation of responsibilities regarding village forests to the Panchayats and Mouzadars, their engagement proved inadequate, leading to scepticism about the viability of the entire initiative aimed at establishing village forests. The endeavour to establish village forests within the confines of reserved forests, while pragmatic and beneficial in terms of the relationship between the community and the forest, was undermined by the imposition of numerous restrictions and levies that ultimately detracted from their interests. A discernible lack of enthusiasm was observed among the residents of the village forests. A limited number of 11 forest villages were established by the year 1937 within the extensive forested area along the Assam-Nagaland border.

Table 1: Number of Village Forests in Assam- Nagaland Border, 1937

Name of division	*Name of subdivisions*	*Name of reserved forests*	*No. of forest villages*
Sibsagar	1. Karbi-Anglong	1. Upper Daigrung 2. Kaliani 3. Mikir Hills	1 1 1
	2. Golaghat	1. Nambor 2. Dayang	2 4
	3. Jorhat	1. Holongapar 2. Disoi	1 1
		Total	11

Source: Assam Legislative Assembly Debate, December 8-9, 1937, Vol. III: 2050-2052

W.W. Hunter noted that in the early twentieth century, a significant portion of the highlands in the central and southern Sibsagar district was initially covered in dense forest, yet a considerable amount had been appropriated by tea planters (Hunter, 1975). Understanding the value of land, a segment of the agricultural community also asserted claims to forested areas for the purpose of expanding agricultural endeavours, alongside the landless farmers who sought rehabilitation and land for cultivation (Saikia, 2008a). The colonial administration promptly initiated a range of deforestation projects and actively promoted the reclamation of forest land by the peasantry. In response to the persistent labour shortages in forest management, four forest villages were established in the year 1905. Simultaneously, three Taungya villages — Gomariguri, Tarani, and Jamuguri — were founded within the confines of the Dayang reserve forest. As a result, 14 forest villages were established in Diroi, 3 in Abhaypan, 2 in Geleki, 1 in Tiruhills, 4 in Desoi and Desoi Valley, and 2 in Kakadonga to cater to the needs of the Forest Department.

The 1940s saw a significant peasant uprising led by the Communist Party of India (CPI), the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI), and the Congress Socialist Party (CSP). The movement gained traction as phrases such as “land to the tillers” and “land to the landless peasant” were incorporated. An increasing number of peasants found solidarity under the auspices of the peasant organizations. Consequently, the

mobilization of sharecroppers emerged in various areas of the region in opposition to the absentee landowners, escalating into a significant issue across the state. The provincial Government of Assam, under the leadership of the Congress Party, encountered a formidable challenge posed by the burgeoning peasant movement and sought to devise a strategy to navigate the complexities of this agrarian discontent. The Congress Socialist Party (CSP) initiated a movement that became widely recognized as the "Ghiladhari Satyagraha," advocating for land from the tea grants of the Ghiladhari tea estate (Hussain, 2004).

In response to increasing pressure, the government designated portions of grazing areas for agricultural expansion. In 1950, the government allocated 9,839 bighas (approximately 5,927 acres) of local grazing land and 29,174 bighas (approximately 17,573 acres) from designated grazing areas to landless peasants and individuals affected by floods. The government allocated around 37,290 bighas of forest land to landless peasants. Subsequently, R. V. Subramaniam, Secretary to the Government of Assam, Tribal Areas and Development Department, issued an order through notification No. TAD/FR/5/50/67 dated 6th March 1952, to deforest 3824.6 acres (1548.42 hectares) of Nambor West Block to allocate land for the Karbi people for cultivation and settlement in the plains. The Joint Secretary of the Forest Department, Government of Assam, issued two consecutive notices, No. FOR/Sctt/351/60/158 and 159, to deforest 765.24 hectares and 54.84 hectares, respectively, from the Diphu and Nambor South reserved forests in 1965. As reports regarding land allocation to the landless and cultivators were disseminated, hundreds of peasants from adjacent regions began flocking to the forested areas along the Assam-Nagaland border.

In the meantime, Soneswar Borah, the Minister of the Government of Assam, spearheaded the peasant movement in Dayang with notable leadership. Upon his election to the Assembly in 1978, Borah was entrusted with the portfolio of Agriculture. In his capacity as Agriculture Minister of the Government, Borah advocated for the interests of the settlers in the Dayang region and expressed his willingness to endorse their claims for rights on forest land. It inherently provided significant refuge to the encroachers and other inhabitants of the area. In 1978, they commemorated the judgement by hosting the "Dayang Bijoy Utshav," which was graced by the presence of the then Chief Minister Golap Borbora as the Chief Guest (Bora,1978). The initiation of this act was marked by the establishment of the Nagaland state in 1963.

Colonial forest policies, including the Indian Forest Act (1878) and Assam Forest Regulation (1891), restricted community access to forests, leading to significant deforestation and biodiversity loss. Forest inhabitants from Jamuguri and Borhollah reported shrinking forests due to ongoing disputes, with field observations in Gomariguri confirming cleared agricultural patches. Secondary data note 17,500 hectares of Diphu R.F. and 10,000 hectares of Nambor South R.F. encroached (The Indian Express, 2007), with 55.71% of 1,401,184.8 acres allocated from 1947 to 2000 as common property resources (Farnandes and Barbora, 2008). A Tsurmen Basti headman linked settlement expansion to deforestation, highlighting the environmental toll of competing land claims.

Contemporary Contentions over Forest Villages

After the declaration of the State, Nagaland created a dispute over the boundary line between the two states. Pressure to fix the boundary was mounting as the Nagaland Government became more aggressive on the problem. The politicians and the administration of Assam immediately took steps to keep control over the border areas by settling more and more Assamese peasants in the forested border areas. The government, in the meantime, decided to distribute 10 bighas of land per peasant. In a diplomatic move, the government of Assam introduced a system, officially known as "half-a-mile settlement". The modus operandi of this system was that the settlers of Assam could settle within a distance of half a mile from the boundary line between the two states. Thus, the opening of Dayang reserved forests for the peasants came into reality. Chief Minister Golap Borbora did not even hesitate to spell out that peasantisation had already taken place in part of these forests (ALAP, 1978).

The border region between Nagaland and Assam is marked by diverse tribal communities. In Nagaland, the Ao, Angami, Rengma, Lotha, Sema, and Konyak tribes dominate, while Assam is home to the Sonowal Kachari, Thengal Kachari, Tai Khamyang, Mishing, Bodo, and Karbi tribes. Despite centuries of coexistence, tensions persist, often fueled by disputes over land ownership and resource control. The introduction of tea tribes during British colonial rule further complicates the socio-political landscape (Saikia, 2008b).

The core issue is competition for fertile land, especially along the Assam-Nagaland border, crucial for agriculture. Both indigenous and migrant populations have clashed over land, leading to violence and displacement. The demographic shifts caused by migration and land disputes have created new socio-political challenges, with tea tribes competing for resources alongside indigenous groups like the Bodo and Karbi tribes. In Nagaland, tribal autonomy struggles intersect with land disputes with Assamese communities, adding to the region's complexity. These territorial conflicts are intertwined with cultural, political, and economic identity. The battle for land is not just economic but also a fight to preserve cultural heritage and political autonomy. As border conflicts escalate, they challenge established governance structures, shaping the future of Nagaland and Assam. Without dialogue and resource management, the region faces continued instability (Goswami, 2017).

Table 2: Major tribal groups in Assam-Nagaland Border Area

Tribes from Assam	*Tribes from Nagaland*
1. Sonowal Kachari	1. Ao
2. Thengal Kachari	2. Lotha
3. Karbi	3. Rengma
4. Bodo	4. Konyak
5. Mishing	5. Sema
6. Turung	6. Sumi

The debate and contention, however, persisted with increasing intensity as the Naga extremist group intensified its operations in and around the border regions. In 1979, a tragic escalation occurred, resulting in the loss of several Assamese peasants' lives and

the destruction of villagers' homes. Amidst pervasive animosity, the trans-border conflict escalated into violence in 1985, resulting in significant loss of life on both sides. In order to alleviate the circumstances, security forces were strategically positioned in the majority of the vulnerable regions along the border. The total area of Assam encompasses 78,550 sq.km, yet it has been reported that over 86,886.12 hectares have been encroached upon by five neighbouring states. Nagaland has faced allegations of encroaching upon 66,241 hectares (The Indian Express, 2007). The encroached regions in Nagaland predominantly consist of reserved forests, including Diphu R.F., Nambor R.F., Dayang R.F., Desoi Valley R.F., Tiru Hills R.F., and Abhaypur R.F. The most recent report from the Department of Forest, Government of Assam, has verified that 17,500 hectares of Diphu R.F., 10,000 hectares of Nambor South R.F., and 11,800 hectares of Rengma R.F. have been exclusively encroached upon by Nagaland. In the E-sector of the border, 14 villages have been established by Nagaland (Dainik Janambhumi, 2011). However, Nagaland has categorically denied these allegations. This allegation has consequently emerged as a point of contention between the states of Nagaland and Assam.

The border dispute between Assam and Nagaland is clearly a manifestation of the rivalry among the competing agrarian communities for access to arable land. Lannusosang (1987) analyzed the developmental aspects of Nagaland, demonstrating that the western low hill zone, which faces the broad plain, is the most economically accessible area. In contrast, the interior eastern part of Nagaland is characterized by low productivity and significant inaccessibility. The western region of Nagaland is identified as the central zone for comprehensive development, thereby attracting the majority of economic activities to this area. The Government, in its capacity, has demonstrated a requisite commitment to the expansion of arable land acquisition from the plains.

In reference to an interview with Nobal Hongrai, a Nepali-speaking settler from Borhollah village, Dolly Kikon asserted that this village has been remitting taxes to the Nagaland Government since 1969. In the border regions of the foothills, inhabitants who established their homes in the 1980s encountered an obligation to remit taxes to the Naga authorities. The majority of the settlers acknowledged that the Government of Assam permitted them to establish themselves in these border regions. In contrast, the Naga authority asserts ownership of the foothill zone and has consistently engaged in efforts to develop robust infrastructure for the benefit of its community. Tsurmen Basti, a Naga village nestled within the Tiru Hills reserved forest, has successfully obtained a range of essential amenities, including educational institutions, electricity, and water supply, courtesy of the Nagaland Government. This development serves as an encouragement for the Naga populace to establish themselves in new regions of the plains. “It is truly remarkable how, within a sovereign nation such as India, National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) rebels have managed to construct bunkers in proximity to the Assam-Nagaland border at Merapani, Golaghat district, with the apparent aim of forcibly seizing territory belonging to Assam” (The Times of India, 2013).

In an interesting statement, Dr. H. Sarmah, the spokesperson and Minister of the Government of Assam, conveyed to Zee News during an interview, “There are no Naga areas in Assam; only a few Zeme Nagas reside in the North Hills District. The limited number of Nagas residing in other regions of the state is characterized as ‘encroachers’ rather than true inhabitants” (Zee News, 2011). The contrasting perspectives are likewise

represented by its counterpart, the Nagaland Government. The Minister for the Nagaland Border Affairs, T.C.K. Lotha, has categorically denied the claims made by Assam's delegation regarding alleged encroachments by Nagaland into border areas. He has instead accused the Assam Government of extensive encroachments into Nagaland territory, referencing a recent incident in Merapani, located in the Wokha district, where land belonging to the Nagas was reportedly allocated to Assam soldiers without consent a few months prior" (The Oriental Times, 1999). In the midst of this ongoing conflict, numerous lethal confrontations occurred between the two states, with reports indicating the involvement of extremist groups targeting both government security personnel and civilians (The Statesman, 2017). The initial confrontation arising from the border contention with Nagaland occurred in 1968, when it was reported that Nagaland police allegedly assaulted Assamese settlements within the Doyang forest reserve. An analogous occurrence was documented in January 1979 within the Rengma forest reserve.

The territorial contention between Assam and Nagaland attracted considerable scrutiny following the Merapani incident in 1985. The most catastrophic violence occurred when police troops from both states clashed in Merapani, Golaghat district, killing over 100 persons, the majority of whom were from Assam (The Indian Express, 2007). Merapani, a town characterized by its distinctive geographical positioning, experienced division when the new boundary delineating Assam and Nagaland was established in 1963, subsequent to the formation of Nagaland. The boundary delineates Merapani into two distinct regions: one situated in Assam and the other in Nagaland. The Golaghat-Dimapur state highway traverses the town, with the Assam segment designated as Merapani Bazaar and the Nagaland portion, located in Wokha district, identified as Merapani Foothill. Nagaland asserts its claim over a portion of Merapani Bazaar that is situated within the current boundaries of Assam. Merapani is situated 25 kilometers from the administrative centre of Golaghat district. The total population of Merapani town in Assam is approximately 150,000, while in Merapani village in Nagaland, it stands at around 1,500. In Assam, the demographic composition includes groups such as the Ahoms, Chutia, Koch, Bodo, Adivasi, Mising, Sonowal Kachari, caste Hindu Assamese, Muslims, and Bengalis. On the other hand, in Nagaland, the predominant population is primarily from the Lotha community. The predominant livelihood for individuals residing on either side of the border is agriculture, although a minor segment is engaged in small-scale trading, business, and government employment (Kikon, 2008).

These caricatures of the border dispute create widespread unrest and insecurity along the Assam-Nagaland Border. The failure to integrate land alienation and conflicts leaves much ambiguity, which often results in conflicts. The borders have either not been marked properly or the border landmarks have somehow disappeared. The people inhabiting these areas have interacted with each other for over a century (Farnandes and Barbora, 2008). But their knowledge is not recognized or given due importance from colonial periods onward, and no formal alternative is worked out. The conflict has, therefore, continued for a longer time.

Since Nagaland's creation in 1963, tensions over forest villages have escalated, fueled by competing land claims. A Merapani resident recalled the 1985 Merapani clash, which killed over 100 people, while a Tsurmen Basti headman noted Nagaland's infrastructure development as a driver of settlement in disputed areas. Uriamghat stakeholders

criticized Assam's "half-a-mile settlement" policy for sparking conflicts, as supported by ALAP (1978). Secondary sources confirm Nagaland's alleged encroachment of 66,241 hectares (Dainik Janambhumi, 2011). Gomariguri respondents highlighted agrarian rivalries between the Ao and Karbi tribes, exacerbated by tea tribe migration, as a key source of unrest.

The Status of Land Alienation and Nature of Ownership

The Assam-Nagaland Border region showcases a remarkable tapestry of cultural and ethnic diversity. The various ethnic groups exhibit distinct variations in socio-economic development levels, alongside differing behavioral patterns. The tribal economy has traditionally centered around land and various land-based resources. Even in contemporary times, land remains the cornerstone for 90 percent of the tribal population residing in this border region of Assam and Nagaland. The pattern of land use has undergone a significant transformation in the post-Independence period, characterized by the conversion of agricultural land to various non-agricultural applications. The cumulative area allocated for development initiatives from 1947 to 2000 amounts to 1,401,184.8 acres. A total of 55.71 percent constitutes common property resources (CPRs) (Farnandes and Barbora, 2008). The majority of the CPRs consist of tribal land; however, the state fails to acknowledge their ownership in accordance with the individual ownership-centric colonial land laws that persist in the country. The majority of the territories inhabited by the tribal communities along the Assam-Nagaland border lack formal recognition of rights. These fall under the authority of either the Department of Forest and Environment or the Department of Land Revenue. The pattern of land ownership within tribal zones is distinguished by a system of communal ownership. This phenomenon is especially prevalent among the Karbis, Mishings, Sonowals, and the Naga tribes. Nagaland is regulated by Article 31 A of the Constitution of India, which articulates that "ownership of land and its resources shall apply to the State of Nagaland." Consequently, the matter of land ownership engenders many complications associated with land alienation, a critical concern for the indigenous tribes residing in the Assam region. A sequence of actions undertaken by the agrarian class seeking land ownership, coupled with a series of eviction initiatives executed by the forestry authorities throughout the region, culminated in circumstances reminiscent of warfare. This matter demands urgent consideration from the relevant authorities to alleviate the oppressive socio-political climate affecting the tribes in the region.

Unclear land ownership, rooted in colonial laws favouring individual titles over communal systems, drives conflict and alienation. Borhollah settlers reported paying taxes to Nagaland since 1969, while Assam claims jurisdiction, creating governance conflicts. Uriamghat and Jamuguri stakeholders noted that tribes like Karbis and Mishings lack formal land titles, with lands controlled by the Forest Department. Tsurmen Basti respondents described Naga settlement expansion into Assam's forests, with 14 villages in the E-sector. A Merapani headman stressed that without clear boundaries and recognition of tribal land rights under Article 31A, conflicts and environmental degradation persist.

Conclusion

This study meticulously examines the historical foundations of the ongoing conflict between the Assam and Nagaland states pertaining to border issues, highlighting the influence of colonial interventions and their repercussions on border forest land and resources. This study asserts that the recurrent violence between the police forces of Assam and Nagaland can be ascribed to the deficiencies in effective governance exhibited by both state governments. The lack of accurate land documentation and ineffective local administrative practices for addressing land disputes has intensified the situation, transforming boundary conflicts into a more extensive dilemma of people contending with history. In the absence of well-defined and enforceable governance frameworks, conflicts have intensified into violent confrontations, as historical grievances and unresolved territorial claims perpetuate tensions among the states. This study argued that the ambiguity surrounding jurisdiction in the contested regions has led to prevalent deforestation and significant environmental deterioration. The persistent strife and ambiguity surrounding land ownership have resulted in the detrimental overexploitation of natural resources, such as timber, minerals, and water. The obliteration of forests and various natural habitats has resulted in a significant decline in biodiversity and the deterioration of ecosystems within the border region. This study suggests that it is imperative to consider historical factors, particularly colonialism, to effectively frame policies aimed at resolving the ongoing border conflicts between Assam and Nagaland. The Union government must take decisive action regarding the ongoing conflict between Assam and Nagaland, formulating a constructive policy aimed at the sustainable management of forest resources while fostering trust among the communities in the border areas.

References

ALAP (1978). Assam Legislative Assembly Proceedings. A statement by Chief Minister Golap Borbora. Government of Assam, India.

Barpujari, H.K. (1992). *The Comprehensive History of Assam. Vol II*. Guwahati, India: Assam Publication Board.

Borah, S. (1978). *Bidrohar Pratiddhani*. Golaghat, India: Self Publication.

Boro, Y.K. and Kakoti, D. (2024). Sub-National border conflict between Assam and Nagaland: A case study of Uriamghat. *Library Progress International*, 44(3): 7314–7328. DOI: https://doi.org/10.48165/bapas.2024.44.2.1.

Dainik Janambhumi. (2011, August 13). Seema vivadar samasyar samadhan ketia. *Dainik Janambhumi*. https://s2.dainikjanambhumi.co.in/

Das, T. and Sarma, A. (2014). Nagaland-Assam Border Dispute: Past Perspective. *Newslaundry*. Available online at: https://tinyurl.com/5n6v4tm9 (accessed on 9 September 2024).

Dowerah, S. (2014). How the Assam-Nagaland border dispute became a people versus history problem. *Firstpost*. Available online at: https://tinyurl.com/55advm9u (accessed on 01 August 2025).

Down to Earth (2024). Assam's Forests on the Brink: Urgent Action Needed to Prevent Environmental Collapse. *Down to Earth*. Available online at: https://tinyurl.com/y8eksvwf (accessed on 22 October 2024).

Farnandes, W. and Barbora, S. (2008). *Land, People and Politics: Contest over Tribal Land in Northeast India*. Guwahati, India: North Eastern Social Research Centre (NESRC).

Franke, M. (2009). *War and Nationalism in South Asia: The Indian State and the Nagas*. London: Routledge.

Gait, E.A. (2013). *A History of Assam*. Guwahati, India: EBH Publishers (Reprint, originally published 1906).

Gogoi, D. (2019). Frontier, border, and territorial state. In: D. Gogoi (ed.), *Making of India's Northeast: Geopolitics of Borderland and Transnational Interactions*. London: Routledge. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429340352.

Gogoi, L. (1983). *Beli Mar Gal*. Calcutta, India: Sribhumi Publishing Company.

Goswami, B.N. (2017). *Political Ecology of Deforestation and Tribal Life*. New Delhi: Concept Publication.

Handique, R. (2004). *British Forest Policy in Assam*. New Delhi: Concept Publication.

Hunter, W.W. (1975). *A Statistical Account of Assam (Vol. II)*. London: Trubner & Co (Reprint, originally published 1879).

Hussain, J. (2004). Doyangar Andolon: Kichu Purani Kotha. *Dainik Janambhumi*, June 19. Available online at: https://s2.dainikjanambhumi.co.in/ (accessed on 01 August 2025).

Kikon, D. (2008). Ethnography of the Nagaland-Assam Foothills in Northeast India. In: W. Fernandes and S. Barbora (eds.), *Land, People and Politics: Contest over Tribal Land in Northeast India*, p.58–88. Guwahati, India: North Eastern Social Research Centre (NESRC).

Kindo, C. and Minj, D. (2008). Impact of Assam-Nagaland territorial dispute in the district of Golaghat, Assam. In: L. Jeyaseelan (ed.), *Conflict Mapping and Peace Processes in Northeast India*, p.8–53. Guwahati, India: North Eastern Social Research Centre (NESRC).

Konyak, N.N. (2016). Assam-Nagaland Border Dispute: Need for a New Framework. *Third Concept*, April: 53–54.

Lannusosang, T. (1987). *Nagaland: A Study in Social Geography*. Unpublished Thesis. Guwahati, India: Gauhati University.

Mahanta, S. (2024). Understanding The Border Disputes of Northeast India: Special Emphasis on Assam and its Bordering States. *Journal Of Advanced Zoology,* 45(3). DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.53555/jaz.v45i3.4246.

Makenzie, A. (1979). *The North East Frontier of India*. New Delhi: Mittal Publications (Reprint, originally published 1884).

Misra, U. (2014). Assam-Nagaland Border Violence. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 49(38).

Ribbentrop, B. (1989). *Forestry in British India*. New Delhi: Indus Publishing Company (Reprint, originally published 1900).

Rumley, D. and Minghi, J.V. (Eds.). (1991). *The Geography of Border Landscapes*. New York: Routledge. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315746593.

Saikia, A. (2008a). Forest land and peasant struggles in Assam, 2002–2007. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 35(1): 39–59. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03066150801983402.

Saikia, A. (2008b). State, peasants, and land reclamation: The predicament of forest conservation in Assam, 1850s–1980s. *Indian Economic & Social History Review*, 45(4): 453–482. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/001946460704500103.

Stracey, P.D. (1953). *Notes on Forest Industries for Assam*. Shillong, India: Assam Government Press.

Sundaram, K.V.K. (1976). *Report of the Advisor K.V.K. Sundaram on the Assam-Nagaland Boundary*. Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, New Delhi.

The Indian Express. (2007). Nagaland CM TR Zeliang expresses hope for broad-based consultations to facilitate resolution of Naga political problem. *The Indian Express,* August 13. Available online at: https://tinyurl.com/yjef8mzn (accessed on 01 August 2025).

The Oriental Times (1999). Assam-Nagaland border dispute. *The Oriental Times*, 2(9-10): 228. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

The Statesman (2017). The Naga question. *The Statesman*, January 9. Available online at: https://www.thestatesman.com/features/the-naga-question-1483948491.html (accessed on 01 August 2025).

The Times of India (2013). Assam-Nagaland meeting on border row. *The Times of India,* June 10. Available online at: https://tinyurl.com/4vzcbmm3 (accessed on 01 August 2025).

Zee News (2011). Interview with Dr. H. Sarmah, spokesperson and Minister of the Government of Assam. *Zee News*, November 18. https://www.zeenews.com

Annexure-1: Schedule for Data Collection Format

(Data collected will be used solely for research purposes, and strict confidentiality will be maintained)

Section-A

1.	Name of the Respondent	
2.	Sex	
3.	Age	
4.	Contact No	
5.	Name of the village/ward	
6.	Block	
7.	Territorial Division (Forest):	
8.	Education status	
9.	Family Occupation	
10.	Family Annual Income	
11.	Status of land holding at present	

Section-B

12.	What impact has the Assam-Nagaland border dispute had on local agricultural practices in the region? Explain	
13.	Have you dependent on the forest areas of Assam-Nagaland border? If yes, how?	
14.	Why do you depend upon the forests? Reasons	
15.	How have the Assam-Nagaland border conflicts affected the availability of natural resources for local communities?	
16.	Do you have any issues regarding Assam-Nagaland border dispute? If yes, what are the issues?	
17.	Has the border dispute influenced the ecological balance in the region?	
18.	Do you have any memory regarding of Assam-Nagaland border conflict? Could you explain in detail?	
19.	How have government policies addressing the Assam-Nagaland border dispute impacted local communities' access to land for agro forestry?	
20.	Do you receive any support from Government or NGOs to upgrade your livelihood? If so, what kind of assistance?	
21.	What role do you believe historical tensions play in shaping the current ecological	

	challenges faced by communities in the Assam-Nagaland border areas?	
22.	What is your role to preserve the natural resources in the periphery of Assam-Nagaland?	
23.	What impact has the Assam-Nagaland border dispute had on local agricultural practices in the region?	
24.	How do border tensions affect the cooperation between local communities and government agencies in managing natural resources?	
25.	What are the main challenges faced by local communities in the Assam-Nagaland border areas due to the historical and ecological implications of the border disputes?	

(Signature of Respondent)
Date & Time:

Authors' Declarations and Essential Ethical Compliances

Authors' Contributions (in accordance with ICMJE criteria for authorship)

Contribution	*Author 1*	*Author 2*
Conceived and designed the research or analysis	Yes	Yes
Collected the data	Yes	No
Contributed to data analysis & interpretation	Yes	Yes
Wrote the article/paper	Yes	Yes
Critical revision of the article/paper	No	Yes
Editing of the article/paper	Yes	Yes
Supervision	Yes	Yes
Project Administration	Yes	Yes
Funding Acquisition	No	No
Overall Contribution Proportion (%)	50	50

Funding
No funding was available for the research conducted for and writing of this paper.

Research involving human bodies or organs or tissues (Helsinki Declaration)
The author(s) solemnly declare(s) that this research has not involved any human subject (body or organs) for experimentation. It was not clinical research. The contexts of human population/participation were only indirectly covered through literature review. Therefore, an Ethical Clearance (from a Committee or Authority) or ethical obligation of Helsinki Declaration does not apply in cases of this study or written work.

Research involving animals (ARRIVE Checklist)
The author(s) solemnly declare(s) that this research has not involved any animal subject (body or organs) for experimentation. The research was not based on laboratory experiment involving any kind animal. The contexts of animals were only indirectly covered through literature review. Therefore, an Ethical Clearance (from a Committee or Authority) or ethical obligation of ARRIVE does not apply in cases of this study or written work.

Research on Indigenous Peoples and/or Traditional Knowledge
The author(s) solemnly declare(s) that this research has involved Indigenous Peoples as participants or respondents. The contexts of Indigenous Peoples or Indigenous Knowledge were only indirectly covered through literature review. Therefore, prior informed consent (PIC) of the respondents or Self-Declaration in this regard is appended.

Research involving Plants
The author(s) solemnly declare(s) that this research has not involved the plants for experiment and field studies. Some contexts of plants are also indirectly covered through literature review. Thus, during this research the author(s) obeyed the principles of the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Convention on the Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora.

Research Involving Local Community Participants (Non-Indigenous) or Children
The author(s) solemnly declare(s) that this research has not directly involved any local community participants or respondents belonging to non-Indigenous peoples. Neither this study involved any child in any form directly. The contexts of different humans, people, populations, men/women/children and ethnic people were only indirectly covered through literature review. Therefore, an Ethical Clearance (from a Committee or Authority) or prior informed consent (PIC) of the respondents or Self-Declaration in this regard does not apply in cases of this study or written work.

PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses)
The author(s) has/have NOT complied with PRISMA standards. It is not relevant in case of this study or written work.

Competing Interests/Conflict of Interest
Author(s) has/have no competing financial, professional, or personal interests from other parties or in publishing this manuscript. There is no conflict of interest with the publisher or the editorial team or the reviewers.

Attribution and Representation
All opinions and mistakes are the author(s)' own and cannot be attributed to the institutions they represent. The publisher is also not responsible either for such opinions and mistakes in the text or graphs or images.

Declaration of the Use of AI
During the preparation of this work, the authors have not used AI to assists the script translation and proof reading. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the published article.

Rights and Permissions

Open Access. This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third-party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this license, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/.

***

To see original copy of these declarations signed by Corresponding/First Author (on behalf of other co-authors too), please download associated zip folder [Declarations] from the published Abstract page accessible through and linked with the DOI: https://doi.org/10.33002/nr2581.6853.080235.

SELF-DECLARATION FORM
Research on Indigenous Peoples and/or Traditional Knowledge

The nature and extent of community engagement should be determined jointly by the researcher and the relevant community or collective, taking into account the characteristics and protocols of the community and the nature of the research.

If your research involved/involves the Indigenous Peoples as participants or respondents, you should fill in and upload this Self-Declaration and/or Prior Informed Consent (PIC) from the Indigenous Peoples. [Please read carefully https://grassrootsjournals.org/credibility-compliance.php#Research-Ethics]

1. Conditions of the Research

1.1 Was or will the research (be) conducted on (an) Indigenous land, including reserve, settlement, and land governed under a self-government rule/agreement or?

Yes

1.2 Did/does any of the criteria for participation include membership in an Indigenous community, group of communities, or organization, including urban Indigenous populations?

Yes, this study was undertaken in the border Areas of Assam-Nagaland, focussing on the nature of conflicts and its impact on the natural resources. However, this does not pertain to indigenous knowledge. This data exclusively concerned individual opinions on the government initiatives and measures in order to reduce the burden on the forest land and resources.

1.3 Did/does the research seek inputs from participants (members of the Indigenous community) regarding a community's cultural heritage, artifacts, traditional knowledge, biocultural or biological resources or unique characteristics/practices?

No

1.4 Did/will Aboriginal identity or membership in an Indigenous community used or be used as a variable for the purposes of analysis?

Yes

2. Community Engagement

2.1 If you answered "Yes" to questions 1.1, 1.2, 1.3 or 1.4, have you initiated or do you intend to initiate an engagement process with the Indigenous collective, community or communities for this study?

Yes

2.2 If you answered "Yes" to question 2.1, describe the process that you have followed or will follow with respect to community engagement. Include any documentation of consultations (*i.e., formal research agreement, letter of approval, PIC, email communications, etc*.) and the role or position of those consulted, including their names if appropriate:

Before conducting the field study in the study area, we obtained permission from the local traditional authorities in the respective villages. We adhered to oral interview protocols about the authorization for formal research agreements and local protocols for this study. The collected interviews were transcribed, translated, and interpreted, with consent received from the respondents. The list of respondents who participated in the interviews are as follows:

S. No.	*Name**	*Designation*	*Address*
1.		Village headman	Village Under Merapani
2.		Milkman	Village Under Merapani
3.		Daily worker	Village Under Uriamghat
4.		Shopkeeper	Nagajanka, Desoi Valley
5.		Small tea gardener	Nagajanka, Desoi Valley
6.		Village headman	Nagabat, Borholla
		Small tea gardener	Nagajanka, Desoi Valley
7.		Cultivator	Village Under Uriamghat
8.		Timber supplier	Village Under Merapani
9.		Teacher and reporter	Sorupathar

*Names of respondents are removed from the above table in order to obey the confidentiality and ethics of not disclosing personal information.

3. No Community Consultation or Engagement

If you answered "No" to question 2.1, briefly describe why community engagement will not be sought and how you can conduct a study that respects Aboriginal/ Indigenous communities and participants in the absence of community engagement.

Name of Principal Researcher: **Bhrigumoni Nath**
Affiliation of Principal Researcher: Research Scholar, Department of History, Assam University, Diphu Campus, Assam.

Bhrigumoni Nath

Declaration: Submitting this note by email to any journal published by The Grassroots Institute is your confirmation that the information declared above is correct and devoid of any manipulation.